Measuring and Understanding Authentic Youth Engagement

The Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric

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Commonly described as *youth-led* or *youth-driven*, the youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) model has gained increasing popularity in out-of-school time (OST) programs in the past two decades (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). The Y-AP model is defined as "the practice of (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together (b) in a collective (democratic) fashion (c) over a sustained period of time (d) through shared work (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue" (Zeldin et al., 2013, p. 388). Unlike traditional OST programs, in which youth are viewed as service recipients, the Y-AP model emphasizes that youth serve in meaningful leadership roles in the organization or program. Studies show that programs using a Y-AP model have offered youth such diverse and meaningful roles as being youth council members, activity leaders, or program representatives in community events (Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Research has also found that these experiences facilitate the development of youth autonomy (Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014), which is a critical developmental need for adolescence. These leadership roles also contribute to youths' empowerment and civic engagement, develop social-emotional skills,

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and bring about positive changes in communities (Akiva et al., 2014; Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011; Larson & Angus, 2011; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010; Youniss & Levine, 2009).

Although the concept of Y-AP has been well received, implementing it without clear guidelines can be challenging. Zeldin and colleagues (2013) reviewed Y-AP practices in community settings (Camino, 2005; Larson & Angus, 2011; Van Egeren, Wu, & Kornbluh, 2012) and connected its roots to developmental theories such as Dewey's (1938) experiential learning, Erikson's (1968) identity development in adolescence, Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological human development, and Li and Julian's (2012) work in developmental relationships. They then put forth a theoretical framework to define and operationalize Y-AP. In their definition, the Y-AP model consists of four critical elements: (a) authentic decision making, (b) natural mentors, (c) reciprocal activity, and (d) community connectedness (Zeldin et al., 2013). This theoretical framework provides an invaluable starting point for elaborating and concretizing the concept of Y-AP and highlighting essential guidelines.

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Program quality and fidelity in implementation ensure that youth receive the intended benefits of program participation. To achieve quality and fidelity, various organizations have developed youth program quality assessments; see Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, Fischer, and Shinn (2009) for a summary of the available tools. These measures tap some aspects of Y-AP, such as youth leadership, relationships, staffing, and community linkages; however, no single tool, until now, captured the full complement of Y-AP core elements. Furthermore, most current assessments of Y-AP underlying constructs rely on self-reports from staff or youth surveys (Jones & Perkins, 2005; Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014). The lack of a Y-AP assessment tool hinders quality assurance, professional development, and documentation of empirical evidence on Y-AP impacts (Zeldin et al., 2013). We therefore developed a rubric for observing and assessing Y-AP quality, using the theoretical framework of Zeldin and colleagues (2013). We hope that this rubric will help promote Y-AP standards, program fidelity and assessment, and professional development of youth workers.

Development of the Y-AP Rubric

With support from an Edmund A. Stanley, Jr., research grant from the Robert Bowne Foundation, in spring 2014, this article's authors—researchers from Michigan State University's (MSU) Office of University Outreach and Engagement and directors from the Neutral Zone, a community-based center—formed a project team to co-develop the rubric. The Neutral Zone is a nonprofit organization serving teens in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Established in 1998, it is known for its youth-driven model: Youth take leadership roles in all levels of the organization. The center also disseminates youth-driven practice by training and coaching staff from other organizations.

To develop the Y-AP rubric, we built on a sustained researcher-practitioner partnership established in a previous project on disseminating youth-driven practices (Van Egeren, Wu, Rana et al., 2012). We developed an initial observation rubric based on the Y-AP literature and our years of experience. Building on the theoretical framework of Zeldin and colleagues (2013), we divided the rubric into four categories of Y-AP work:

1. Authentic decision making
2. Natural mentors
3. Reciprocity
4. Community connectedness

The rubric divides program content into two categories: meetings and activities. Each has distinguishable behavioral markers.

Following standard principles for developing measurement tools in general (Kline, 2005; Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991) and observation rubrics in particular (Newell, Dahm, & Newell, 2002), we established rating scales from 1 (low) to 5 (high), with specific descriptions for scores 1, 3, and 5 and additional scores of 2 or 4 when observed criteria fell between the described scores. We also provided an option of "N/A" for items that are not applicable in a given program.

After developing an initial draft, the two researchers from MSU conducted two pilot observations at Neutral Zone programs, in which we achieved satisfying consensus on initial revisions. To test the applicability of the rubric in diverse contexts, the same researchers then observed 10 Neutral Zone programs, which varied in youth demographics, program activities, and focus, in March–April 2014. As shown in Table 1, the programs varied

Table 1. Observation Sample

Type	Program Theme	Adult: Youth Ratio
Activity	Hip-hop writing, recording, and rhymes	2:7
Meeting	Teen advisory council	2:12
Activity	Music event planning	1:3
Activity	Music recording studio	1:2
Meeting	Community event planning	3:10
Meeting	Leadership	1:6
Activity	Art production	1:10
Meeting	Diversity training	1:4
Meeting	Girls' empowerment group	1:4
Meeting	Organization board meeting	15:4

greatly, ranging from activities such as music production, visual arts, and leadership training to organizing meetings. Table 1 also lists the number of youth and adults in each observed program. The racial composition of the youth and adults largely represented the Neutral Zone's population: about half white and half people of color.

All 10 observations were conducted by the two researchers from MSU. After each observation, the observers met to discuss the ratings, reflect on whether each item in the rubric could be applied, and determine whether the rubric needed modification. We also used these observations to provide examples and suggest specific user instructions in the rubric guidelines. Following these procedures, the rubric items underwent several rounds of revision. After we had conducted observations in half of the programs, the rubric had achieved strong fidelity in capturing the Y-AP elements in various program contexts. No further revisions were needed in the remaining five observations. In this process, we had accumulated a shared knowledge of the rating scales that established inter-rater reliability, as demonstrated by a high level of rating agreement and satisfying Cohen's kappa scores.[1]

1 Average Cohen's kappa was .84 for authentic decision making (five items), .88 for natural mentors (eight items), .80 for reciprocity (four items), and .86 for community connectedness (three items).

Because the goal of the project was to establish a meaningful rubric that captures the concepts and practices of Y-AP, the whole project team then held a focus group with seven Neutral Zone staff and two youth to ensure the content validity of the rubric. These participants, who had extensive experience with the Y-AP approach, provided feedback on the wording, examples, and concepts of the rubric items. After incorporating this feedback, we finalized the rubric.

As the rubric was intended to be a suitable tool for peer or self-assessment and data collection by youth workers, administrators, and evaluators, its format went through a series of technical modifications and passed the user-friendly and accessibility tests required by MSU policy. The interactive form of the rubric allows easy data entry and automatic calculation of dimension scores. Users can also save and erase entries with easy-to-use buttons. The rubric was officially launched in November 2014 as a freely available resource at http://cerc.msu.edu/yaprubric. We have since used the rubric in several staff development workshops and disseminated it through professional networks such as the Michigan After-School Partnership newsletter, the Michigan Afterschool Collaborative Conference, and Wisconsin Cooperative Extension.

Based on extensive field notes and actual implementation of the rubric, we set the following appropriate context for the use of rubric: "Any settings that involve multiple youth and adult(s) working together with extensive dialogue for a common goal" (Wu, Weiss, Kornbluh, & Roddy, 2014). These settings could be school programs, afterschool programs, camps, or other programs in which youth and adults interact.

Elements of the Y-AP Rubric

Each of the four dimensions of the Y-AP rubric has a number of specific items for observers to rate, as shown on the next page and described on the following pages. The observation rubric provides details of behaviors that embody each rating and gives examples.

Dimension 1: Authentic Decision Making

Definition: Youth are involved in meaningful decision making.

Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric

Dimension 1: Authentic Decision Making—Youth are involved in meaningful decision making	**AVERAGE**	
1.1 Youths' voices are shared and valued.		
1.2 Youth participate in authentic decision making.		
1.3 Youth have key leadership roles or responsibilities.		
1.4 All youth fully participate in the conversation.		
1.5 The organization's culture or by-laws supports youth governance.		
Dimension 2: Natural Mentors—Adults intentionally support relationships with youth to help them develop	**AVERAGE**	
2.1 Adults support youth with appropriate boundaries.		
2.2 Adults are intentional in utilizing tasks to enhance youths' experiences and skills.		
2.3 Adults are able to work with youth to maintain an organized, inclusive, and collaborative environment for all.		
2.4 Adults are resourceful and intentional in enhancing youths' social capital.		
2.5 Adults are active listeners; youth reflect and develop own ideas.		
2.6 Adults help youth think through the complexity of issues and respect whatever conclusions they reach.		
2.7 Adults help youth think about goals and possibilities for the future and identify steps to achieve them.		
2.8 Adults celebrate youths' progress, strengths, and successes.		
Dimension 3: Reciprocity—Youth and adults work together as partners	**AVERAGE**	
3.1 Youth and adults create a mutual agenda.		
3.2 Youth and adults exchange ideas as supportive peers.		
3.3 Youth and adults work collaboratively as supportive peers.		
3.4 Youth and adults are co-learning partners.		
Dimension 4: Community Connectedness—Youth are engaged in communities	**AVERAGE**	
4.1 Youth develop a sense of community through program involvement.		
4.2 Youth are active contributors to the community.		
4.3 Youth gain essential social capital through program involvement.		
Total: The average of four dimension scores		%

Zeldin and colleagues (2013) note that youth voice is not simply about young people expressing themselves or sharing their views. Rather, in Y-AP settings, adults recognize young people as valuable producers of knowledge, and youth are actively involved in decisions that affect their lives. This dimension's five items assess the extent to which youth participants are involved in high-stakes decisions in their program or organization.

1.1 Youths' voices are shared and valued. For this item, the highest level (5) means that youth bring in new perspectives and their inputs are valued. The lowest level (1) refers to scenarios in which adults largely lead conversations, assign tasks to youth, tell youth what to do, or heavily rely on what has been done in the past without encouraging youth to bring in new perspectives (Lenzi et al., 2014). In practice, we have found that techniques such as imposing "NATT" ("no adult talk time") for parts of a meeting are helpful in encouraging youth voice.

Zeldin and colleagues (2013) note that youth voice is not simply about young people expressing themselves or sharing their views.

1.2 Youth participate in authentic decision making. One effective way to examine the level of youth involvement in decision making is to look at how decisions actually are made. In most programs, decisions have already been made for youth (level 1), or youth are allowed to make decisions on low-stake items such as the food they want to order (level 3). Having youth participate in decisions in high-stake areas by, for example, serving on a hiring committee or developing strategic plans for the organization in partnership with adults (level 5) requires adults' intentional support and youths' willingness.

1.3 Youth have key leadership roles or responsibilities. At level 1 on this item, youth have no specific roles other than being participants. At level 3, they may take on low-stake leadership roles such as leading icebreakers or taking meeting notes. At level 5, youth serve as meeting facilitators. In activities, they may lead conversations, give demonstrations, or co-teach with adults. They are also given higher-stake tasks like meeting with community partners to set up events. Giving youth key leadership roles often requires pre-meetings between the youth leaders and adult advisors in order to properly prepare youth for their responsibilities.

1.4 All youth participate fully in the conversation. Youth vary in the degree to which they are vocal; some want to dominate the conversation, while others tend to be more quiet and reflective. Sometimes adults are not aware of such inequalities or don't take action to balance them out (level 1); at other times, they try to balance contributions but cannot (level 3). To encourage full participation from all youth, adult staff ought to be intentional and strategic in ensuring that everyone can participate (level 5).

1.5 The organization's culture or bylaws support youth governance. In traditional settings, youth often have no explicit role beyond being participants (level 1), or they may lead specific activities though nothing is written or formalized (level 3). Our experience and the research (Van Egeren, Wu, & Kornbluh, 2012; Zeldin et al., 2005) both indicate that sustaining high-stake youth voice depends on whether youth governance is supported by the organization's bylaws and culture (level 5).

Dimension 2: Natural Mentors

Definition: Adults intentionally support relationships with youth to help them develop as leaders.

Y-AP requires high-quality adult mentorships, in which adults intentionally and strategically develop strong, supportive relationships with youth and purposively scaffold youths' development as leaders (Zeldin et al., 2013). The rubric highlights eight aspects of adults' roles as natural mentors to youth.

2.1 Adults support youth with appropriate boundaries. Most adult staff have a genuine desire to help youth, but supporting them with appropriate boundaries can be difficult (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Facing youths' diverse needs, adults are sometimes too overwhelmed to provide sufficient support (level 1), or they may overreact or overreach themselves to solve problems instead of supporting youth from behind (level 3). Supporting youth with appropriate boundaries means that youth feel heard, are able to make and act on their own decisions, and know where to find resources to further support their goals (level 5).

2.2 Adults are intentional in utilizing tasks to enhance youths' experiences and skills. Youth need hands-on experiences in order to grow. At level 1 on

this item, adults do not intentionally encourage youth to take on challenging tasks that enable them to build new skills or networks. At level 3, adults are intentional in this area but fail to provide enough support to enhance youths' experiences and skills. An example of the highest level of using tasks to enhance youths' growth would be encouraging youth to facilitate a focus group instead of just recruiting participants. The adults would need to help youth practice their facilitation skills, identify focus group questions, and decide on strategies for navigating potential pitfalls.

2.3 Adults are able to work with youth to maintain an organized, inclusive, and collaborative environment for all. This rubric item examines the quality of the meeting or activity context. When the context is constantly chaotic, disorganized, or dysfunctional (level 1), or when things go off track periodically (level 3), youth face challenges in learning and collaborating. Adults and youth need to work together to ensure an organized, inclusive, and collaborative environment for all (level 5) so they can focus on reaching their goals (Zeldin et al., 2005).

2.4 Adults are resourceful and intentional in enhancing youths' social capital. Successful mentors bring in resources to benefit youth. Some adults do not think about how their resources can benefit youth (level 1); others may be aware but not take action (level 3). Mentors at level 5 take intentional steps to help youth extend their networks, such as inviting community leaders to program events (Larson & Angus, 2011).

Y-AP requires high-quality adult mentorships, in which adults intentionally and strategically develop strong, supportive relationships with youth and purposively scaffold youths' development as leaders.

2.5 Adults are active listeners; youth reflect and develop own ideas. Because adults are used to leading groups, they often do most of the talking (level 1) or ask youth to talk but eventually take over the discussion (level 3). At level 5 for this item, adults intentionally step back, encouraging youth to reflect on issues and develop their own ideas (Larson et al., 2005).

2.6 Adults help youth think through the complexity of issues and respect whatever conclusions they reach. The issues youth face today can be complex and multifaceted. In strong Y-AP settings (level 5), adults guide youth to navigate the complexities without making decisions for them. Adults instill confidence in youth and support the conclusions they reach. If youth fail, adults will be there to help them reflect on and grow from the experience (Larson & Hansen, 2005). Some adults find this role difficult to uphold, so they bounce between letting go and inserting their opinions (level 3); others may analyze everything and ask youth to follow their advice (level 1). Even with good intentions, adults at these lower levels can hinder opportunities for youth to learn how to make and be responsible for their own decisions.

2.7 Adults help youth think about goals and possibilities for the future and identify steps to achieve them. Another aspect of quality mentorship is helping youth envision their future and take steps to achieve their goals (level 5). This support is especially important to enable vulnerable youth to develop life skills and resilience (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). At level 1, adults dismiss opportunities for youth to envision their goals; at level 3, adults don't help youth identify steps to achieve their goals.

2.8 Adults celebrate youths' progress, strengths, and successes. Although reflecting on mistakes can help youth improve, adults often forget to recognize the strengths youth have developed (level 1) or fail to structure time for youth to reflect on their progress (level 3). Giving youth the opportunity to reflect on and celebrate their own successes (level 5) can promote intrinsic feelings of accomplishment, increase self-confidence, and help develop the "grit" that sustains perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, McLoughlin, & Williams, 2006).

Dimension 3: Reciprocity

Definition: Youth and adults work together as partners.

Reciprocity is a critical aspect of partnerships. In the Y-AP model, learning is not unidirectional. Youth do learn from adults, but adults also learn from youth. The differences in perspectives and experiences between youth and adults can contribute to a richly collaborative

environment. The rubric highlights four aspects of reciprocity in a Y-AP setting.

3.1 Youth and adults create a mutual agenda. One simple way to look at reciprocity between youth and adults is to identify who creates the agenda. If meeting or activity agendas are largely created by adults (level 1) or involve minimal youth input (level 3), youth have little opportunity to develop leadership skills or partner with adults to design their own programs. By contrast, when youth share in setting the agenda or activity content (level 5), their partnership with adults is strengthened, and they are more prepared to facilitate meetings or lead authentically (Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2013).

3.2 Youth and adults exchange ideas as supportive peers. Another way to examine reciprocity is to observe how ideas are exchanged. If youth and adults rarely draw on one another's ideas (level 1), or if they don't really integrate their ideas together (level 3), their partnership remains underdeveloped. When youth and adults can seek one another's opinion comfortably and then build on these ideas (level 5), the whole program benefits from the different strengths each generation brings (Akiva et al., 2014).

3.3 Youth and adults work collaboratively as supportive peers. Observing how youth and adults work is another way to identify reciprocal relationships. If youth and adults tend to work separately (level 1), or if they work collaboratively only on occasion (level 3), then their partnership is still developing. High-quality Y-AP settings make no clear division between adult tasks and youth tasks; rather, youth and adults work collaboratively to achieve common goals (level 5).

In the Y-AP model, learning is not unidirectional. Youth do learn from adults, but adults also learn from youth.

3.4 Youth and adults are co-learning partners. At level 1 on this item, adults are like teachers or authoritarians; they are presumed to be more knowledgeable than youth and therefore responsible for answering questions. At level 3, youth may be encouraged to share some ideas or make specific contributions, yet social norms often dictate that adults know better and therefore are responsible for teaching youth. At level 5, everyone, including youth, can contribute to the knowledge base. Adults are not presumed to be more knowledgeable and are not responsible for answering questions. Youth and adults recognize their capacity to teach and learn from one another; they gain new perspectives and skills through their collaboration (Jennings et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2010).

Dimension 4: Community Connectedness

Definition: Youth are engaged in communities.

The last dimension of Y-AP encompasses community connectedness. Research stresses the importance of Y-AP working toward a larger collective goal (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006). Challenges that adults struggle to tackle often can more effectively be addressed when youth bring their perspectives (Zimmerman, Stewart, Morrel-Samuels, Franzen, & Reischl, 2011). The rubric captures three aspects of how program participation can increase young people's connection to the larger community.

4.1 Youth develop a sense of community through program involvement. Youth, especially those from disenfranchised, at-risk neighborhoods, often feel disconnected from their communities or local institutions. When adults intentionally help youth expand their networks and build connections within the program (level 5), youth can develop a sense of belonging and deepen their engagement in their program and in the larger community (Conner & Strobel, 2007). Programs at level 1 do not provide youth with the opportunities to build ongoing relationships; those at level 3 offer such opportunities, but not to the extent that will enable youth to build a strong sense of group membership.

4.2 Youth are active contributors to the community. Most program activities are designed to benefit participating youth only (level 1); some may have an effect on the program or organization as a whole (level 3). At the highest Y-AP level, activities position youth as contributors to the wider community. Partnerships with adults and activities that enable youth to navigate real-world issues give youth opportunities to think through the critical challenges facing their community and help lead efforts to promote social change (Reischl et al., 2011).

4.3 Youth gain essential social capital through program involvement. In many programs, activities pro-

vide no (level 1) or minimal (level 3) opportunities for youth to engage with communities outside of the organization. When program activities connect youth to the broader community through meaningful collaborations, such as working with business owners or leaders from other organizations to plan a community event (level 5), youth can gain essential social capital that not only enhances their sense of belonging to the community but also supports their future career or educational goals (Jennings et al., 2006).

Considering the Dimensions

The dimension of our Y-AP rubric that has the most items is natural mentors, with eight items. This finding is consistent with prior research highlighting the complexity of the critical roles adult support plays in the development of Y-AP (Zeldin et al., 2014). During the development process, we found that the dimension of natural mentors is highly correlated to the dimension of reciprocity. Ideally, these are two distinguishable concepts; more empirical data is needed to further examine the relationship.

The most difficult dimension to achieve may be involving youth in authentic decision making. It requires intentionally bringing in youth voice, examining the quality of decision-making experiences, and reviewing the organization's structure. Our own experience and prior research (Camino, 2005; Van Egeren, Wu, & Kornbluh, 2012) suggest that gaining administrator buy-in and embedding youth decision making in the organization's mission might be the most effective ways to promote sustained and high-level youth governance.

The fourth dimension, community connectedness, manifests the ultimate goal of Y-AP: cultivating youths' civic engagement and giving them opportunities to become engaged leaders. This dimension's three rubric items capture ways that programs can promote youths' community connectedness. However, these efforts might not be fully visible during specific observation times. To get a more holistic picture, observers may need to ask youth or adults additional questions about community engagement opportunities.

Implications for Research and Practice

The primary limitations of the rubric in its current form are that its psychometric properties have not been statistically validated and that all the observed programs, even though they varied in Y-AP levels, were from the same organization. During development and testing of the rubric in 10 observations, we undertook a series of revisions that expanded the rubric's applicability in various program contexts. However, the small number of observations from one source, along with the subsequent revision of the items, limited the possibility for psychometric testing. Our future research agenda includes collecting quantitative data across different youth organizations or programs to validate the psychometric properties of the rubric. We then hope to establish norms and Y-AP models that would enable different types of youth-serving organizations to consider their own potential. We also plan to revisit the Y-AP theory behind the rubric and re-examine the rubric elements based on the statistical results. Doing so will give the field a fully validated concept and measure of Y-AP practices.

Bearing in mind the lack of validation, the Y-AP rubric can nevertheless be useful in both research and practice. Researchers can use the rubric for internal and external assessments of Y-AP practices. The rubric can facilitate either cross-sectional comparisons on the impacts of Y-AP practices across programs and socio-demographic contexts or longitudinal studies on how Y-AP practices evolve over time within the same context. The rubric's detailed instructions and the interactive form are designed to ease the process of data collection.

Afterschool practitioners can use the rubric as a manual and a self-assessment tool to support implementation of high-quality Y-AP practices. Even programs that are not ready to adapt the full Y-AP model can use the rubric to strengthen specific dimensions of Y-AP, such as adult mentorship or youth leadership in decision making. The descriptions and examples for each rubric item can help practitioners comprehend the levels of implementation and then reflect on their own and their colleagues' behaviors. The average scores, automatically calculated by the interactive form, quantify the presence of Y-AP dimensions and allow easy comparisons across sites or observations. The four Y-AP dimensions have been identified as critical factors contributing to desirable youth outcomes and program engagement (Akiva et al., 2014; Mitra et al., 2013; Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, DuBois, Ji, & Hillaker, 2014). Afterschool programs can strengthen their youth development practices by using the rubric for program evaluation and improvement and for professional development.

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